

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 NEAE-00 SSO-00 INRE-00 USIE-00 CIAE-00

DODE-00 INR-07 NSAE-00 PA-01 USIA-06 PRS-01 SP-02

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6502

INFO AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

AMCONSUL CALCUTTA

AMCONSUL BOMBAY

AMCONSUL MADRAS

C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 0100

E.O. 11652:GDS

TAGS: PINT, ELAB, CE

SUBJECT: POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF CURRENT LABOR UNREST

REF: (A) COLOMBO 0099

1. THE CURRENT WAVE OF STRIKES THROUGHOUT SRI LANKA HAS FURTHER BLURRED AN ALREADY-CONFUSED POLITICAL LANDSCAPE. THE RULING SRI LANKA FREEDOM PARTY (SLFP) IS HAVING SOME DIFFICULTY CONTROLLING ITS WORKERS. ONE PARTY FACTION, THE SO-CALLED MAOIST OR JANAVEGAYA GROUP, HAS DEFIED THE LEADERSHIP AND STRUCK WORK. THE SLFP'S COALITION PARTNER, THE COMMUNIST PARTY, IS NOT EVEN TRYING TO RESTRAIN ITS STRIKING AFFILIATED UNIONS. THE TROTSKYITE LANKA SAMA SAMAJA PARTY (LSSP), WHOSE WORKERS WERE THE FIRST TO GO OUT WHEN THE RAILWAY WAS STRUCK DECEMBER 21, IS ENERGETICALLY BACKING THE WORKERS AND ATTEMPTING TO SPREAD THE STRIKE TO OTHER SECTORS OF THE ECONOMY. THE UNITED NATIONAL PARTY (UNP), NEVER KNOWN FOR ITS STRONG LABOR FOLLOWING, HAS COME OUT UNENTHUSIASTICALLY IN SUPPORT OF THE STRIKERS, AFTER AN INITIAL PERIOD OF EQUIVOCATION.

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2. SINCE THE LSSP WAS DUMPED FROM THE RULING UNITED FRONT COALITION IN SEPTEMBER 1975, IT HAS OCCASIONALLY ATTEMPTED TO USE THE URBAN LABOR STRENGTH FOR WHICH IT IS NOTED TO DEFY THE GOVERNMENT. BEFORE NOW, SUCH AGITATIONS HAVE FALLEN FLAT. THIS TIME THE LSSP FOUND ITSELF LED BY ITS WORKERS ON A GENUINE ECONOMIC GRIEVANCE, AN INCREASE IN THE TRADITIONAL END-OF-THE - YEAR SALARY ADVANCE. WITH SUPPORT FROM ALL SEGMENTS OF THE

RAIL WORKERS, THE TRAIN SYSTEM WAS QUICKLY AND COMPLETELY SHUT DOWN. WHEN THE GOVERNMENT REFUSED TO MEET THEIR FULL DEMANDS AND INSTEAD ATTEMPTED TO FORCE THE EMPLOYEES BACK TO WORK, THE STRIKE QUICKLY SPREAD THROUGH MOST OF THE REST OF THE GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS, ABETTED BY THE LSSP LABOR LEADERS, WHO REALIZED THAT THE Y HAD SOLID BACKING TO CONFRONT THE GOVERNMENT.

3. THE PARTICIPATION BY COMMUNIST PARTY-AFFILIATED UNIONS RAISES INTERESTING POSSIBILITIES ABOUT THE STRAINS WITHIN THE RULING UNITED FRONT. THERE HAS ALREADY BEEN FRICTION BETWEEN THE CP AND SLFP OVER SEAT ALLOCATIONS FOR THE GENERAL ELECTIONS DUE SOMETIME THIS YEAR; SUPPORT FOR THE STRIKE MAY BE ONE WAY FOR THE CP TO TELL THE PM THAT IT HAS ALTERNATIVES TO COALITION POLITICS. THE LSSP WOULD LIKE NOTHING BETTER THAN TO SPLIT THE SLFP-CP COALITION IN ORDER TO WIN THE CP OVER TO ITS OFT-DISCUSSED "SOCIALIST UNITED FRONT." THE STRIKE LINEUP LOOKS VERY MUCH LIKE THE COALITION THEY ENVISAGE--THE LSSP, CP, AND THE LEFT WING OF THE SLFP, WHICH REPRESENTED IN THE CURRENT SITUATION BY THE UNIONS LED BY THE JANAVEGAYA FACTION OF NANDA ELLAWALA, SLFP M.P. FROM RATNAPURA. (THE SILENCE OF THE PM'S SON-IN-LAW, KUMAR RUPASINGHE, ANOTHER PROMINENT JANAVEGAYA LEADER, SEEMS TO SUPPORT RUMORS OF A SPLIT BETWEEN HIM AND ELLAWALA.)

4. THE OPPOSITION UNP HAS BEEN EQUIVOCAL OVER THE STRIKE ISSUE. APPARENTLY THEY HAVE BEEN WORKED THAT THE POTENTIAL CHAOS COULD GIVE THE PM A PRETEXT TO PUT OFF THE GENERAL ELECTIONS WHICH THE UNP HAS BEEN LOOKING FORWARD TO FOR SEVEN YEARS AND WHICH IT CONFIDENTIAL

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HOPES TO WIN. THE UNP BUS UNION HAS NOW COME OUT AND THE PARTY IS COMING AROUND TO AT LEAST TOKEN SUPPORT FOR THE WIDER STRIKE AS WELL.

5. THE TAMIL UNITED LIBERATION FRONT (TULF) HAS DISPLAYED A DISINTEREST IN THE LABOR UNREST. THE TAMIL AREAS OF THE NORTH AND EAST DO NOT APPEAR TO BE TIED UP BY STRIKES ALTHOUGH SOME WORKERS ARE PROBABLY OUT. IN THE GOVERNMENT CLERICAL SERVICE, THE TULF UNION IS THE ONLY ONE WORKING OTHER THAN ONE SMALL SLFP-AFFILIATED UNION. SUCH UNCONCERN ABOUT NON-TAMIL MATTERS IS TYPICAL OF THE TULF'S GENERAL ATTITUDE, BUT IS NEVERTHELESS INTERESTING IN LIGHT OF CONTINUED PRE-STRIKE RUMORS THAT THE TULF HIGH COMMAND HAS BEEN CONSIDERING AN AGREEMENT WITH THE SLFP TO LEND THEIR SUPPORT TO A POSTPONEMENT OF ELECTIONS IN RETURN FOR CONCESSIONS ON SOME TAMIL ISSUES.

6. COMMENT: WHEN THE PM HELD A STRATEGY SESSION WITH HER GOVERNMENT M.P.'S JANUARY 7, ONLY SLFP PARLIAMENTARIANS WERE INVITED. HER COALITION PARTNERS, THE CP MEMBERS, WERE

POINTEDLY EXCLUDED. IN TURN, THE CP POLITBURO HELD ITS OWN MEETING JANUARY 9, OF WHICH WE HAVE HEARD NOTHING AS YET. THE STAINS ARE GROWING AND THE PM'S TEMPER IS REPORTED TO BE SHORT. ALTHOUGH MOST OF HER CABINET IS SAID TO BE READY TO NEGOTIATE WITH THE STRIKERS, WE HAVE REPORTS THAT THE PRIME MINISTER HERSELF, SUPPORTED BY FINANCE MINISTER FELIX DIAS BANDARANAIKE, IS ADAMANTLY OPPOSED TO ANY CONCESSIONS, OR TO ANY DISCUSSIONS BEFORE THE STRIKERS RETURN TO WORK.
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